

Taking a Walk on the Wild Side

The Thrill of Group and Wing Command

by Colonel Larry Spencer

As the first career FMer to command at the group and wing level under the new Air Force command screening process, many have asked about the experience and if I recommend it. The answer to that is a resounding yes! Also, I would be remiss if I did not relate that I have been richly blessed and humbled to have had the opportunity to command. In my view, command is the ultimate leadership opportunity and any officer should feel honored to serve in that capacity. Now that the stage has been set, this article will address those most frequently asked questions about the thrill of group and wing command.

As a comptroller, did you feel qualified for command?

The comptroller career field is unique in a number of ways, one of which is we tend to reach out and touch just about every area in an organization. For example, a base budget officer or financial services officer (FSO) probably knows more about the total operation of a base than most other junior officers do. With that sort of initial foundation, by the time we reach the grade of colonel, comptroller officers should be very familiar with most support group activities. I'd like to add that I think it's crucial for majors and lieutenant colonels to run, not walk, to any comptroller squadron command opportunity. Squadron command is important because it provides command experience, and, of those selected for support group command, most (81% to 92%) have had squadron command.

Additionally, the Air Force has a mandatory pre-command course taught at Maxwell AFB that was a great help. The total course length for support group commanders is three weeks, which includes a one-week on-scene-commander course. Oddly enough, the wing commander course is only one week, but is naturally focused on a more macro level. In my view, both courses were well done and hit the mark in terms of preparation. Briefings covered the more technical areas such as legal, financial, and public affairs techniques; however, the most popular sessions were those spent with prior commanders that simply passed on their experiences and advice. Putting together the broad knowledge that comptroller officers have, along with the formal Air Force training, I think comptrollers are perfectly qualified to command a support group or support wing.

What was it like to be a Support Group Commander?

In a word, it was great! I felt fortunate to be a support group commander at an Air Logistics Center because it was very large and extremely diverse. One thing I learned very quickly was there are three very important pieces of equipment associated with command: a pager, cell phone, and land mobile radio (brick). My indoctrination to those essential elements of command is quite interesting. My change-of-command ceremony was at 1000 hours on a hot August day. Afterward I decided to visit the gym, since it was one of my Services activities. About halfway through a very relaxing run, I was shocked to feel a buzzing sensation on my body. It was my pager. After a rather sudden stop, I returned the call with my cell phone to the command post (a place I learned to love and admire). They informed me of a probable chemical spill, and since the support group commander acts as the on-scene-commander for disaster control, I was asked if they should recall the disaster control group (DCG).

About that same time I felt the buzzing sensation again. It was the base fire chief who explained that he needed me on the scene right away. I immediately called the command post back and told them to recall the DCG. I then ran back to the gym (in record time I might add), jumped in the car (yes, in sweaty gym clothes) and headed for the scene. When I arrived, a Security Forces NCO explained that personnel within the security cordon perimeter had been evacuated and the fire chief briefed me on the situation. Before having much of a chance to assess the next move, the wing commander called on the brick. He wanted to know the situation and said the DCG was enroute. He also asked me to start thinking about what I might say to the press who wanted to come to the scene of the spill. Within minutes, the DCG members arrived on a bus, unloaded, surrounded me and said, what now, sir?

To make a long story short, we successfully resolved that crisis, along with many more during my tour. The key to those successful resolutions, as you might expect, was the knowledge and professionalism of the members in the support group. Although they looked to me for leadership, once we decided on a course of action, I just stood back in awe as they brilliantly performed the mission—and what a mission it was! From donning my helmet and web belt to set up a perimeter defense with the Security Forces, to working with Services to develop creative solutions to increase club membership, to working side-by-side with Mission Support personnel on the mobility processing line, to personally supervising installation of a telephone in the general's vehicle (I won't elaborate on that one), everyday was different, challenging, and above all, fun.

What was it like to be a wing commander?

By far, I have never had, nor do I expect to have in the future, a more challenging and rewarding job than being a wing commander. If being a support group commander was a 10, wing command was off the chart. I had the pleasure of serving as Air Base Wing Commander at Hill AFB UT. We were host to an air logistics center, two fighter wings, the Utah Test and Training Range, and an Air Force museum. I'll never forget my first day on the job. I had just taken an in-brief from my new boss. He said the base was just two months away from a major ORI (Hill had not had a major inspection in five years) and we were not even close to being ready. So, my top priority was to get the wing prepared for the ORI, and more importantly, prepared for real war if necessary.

When I returned to my office, I asked the exec to get his hands on every ORI report he could find and set up a meeting with all the group and squadron commanders. However, before I had a chance to sit down in my new chair, the phone rang. The boss said the President was due into Salt Lake City (SLC), but a record snowstorm had closed the airport for the first time ever. He further stated that Hill was the alternate landing location and that my name had been given to the White House as the point of contact. I immediately asked the exec to cancel the commanders meeting and get me the civil engineering commander ASAP. On second thought, I decided to drive to his office since I had barely met him. I called the CE commander while enroute and requested a snow removal briefing/plan—by this time snow had literally blanketed the base. My secretary called on the car phone while in transit. She proclaimed the phones are ringing off the hook, people want to know what time you are shutting down the base.

Following the CE briefing, I went down to the snow barn to explain how important it was to keep our runway clear. I also went up to the air traffic control tower hoping that the weather would clear—it did not. I'll never forget the scene of those snowplows literally lined up in formation, pushing snow off the runway as fast as they could, only to have it covered up again by the pouring snow. My admiration for the snow crews was rudely interrupted—there goes that buzzing sound again. It was the command post; the President's airplane is in transit to SLC, and by the way, it's already been decided that the First Lady will land at Hill. As it turned out, the SLC airport opened, literally just in time, for the President to land. In the meantime the First Lady and presidential support crews landed safely at Hill. By the way, since drivers in Utah are very good at driving in the snow and the base had not been closed for weather in the past three years, I did not close the base.

As I laid down for bed that first night, I sort of chuckled to myself that this was quite a first day. Little did I know that at 0400 that next morning I'd be roused from a perfect sleep by the ever so familiar command post informing me of a base recall that I vaguely remember approving—almost forgot, need to get ready for the ORI. If you are getting the picture that wing command is a busy job, you're getting the right picture. I can remember being called at all hours of the night, on weekends, while in church, at the gym, at the dinner table, at social functions, and even once while in the shower. The notion that a military member is on duty 24-hours a day certainly applies to wing command. On the other hand, I believe it is the most challenging and fun job in the Air Force. From deploying forces to DESERT THUNDER/FOX, to managing aircraft accidents, to working with AAFES for new base facilities, to giving speeches downtown, I cannot over emphasize what a great, once-in-a-career opportunity this was. If there is one tour that I will remember and cherish my entire life, this was it.

How does one get selected for group and/or wing command?

This is probably the toughest question to answer because there is no magic formula for selection and there are no guarantees. However, I do think there are several things that can be done that might enhance the chances for selection. First, perform, perform, perform. The old adage, bloom where you are planted, certainly applies. Second, as I stated earlier, based on the numbers, squadron command is close to being a prerequisite (although not mandatory) to group command. Third, let your boss know that you are interested in senior command. There is no stronger indicator to a board than a direct recommendation for group/wing command from your boss. Finally, regardless of what job you currently hold, demonstrate leadership and make sure it's documented in your OPR. I can't tell you the number of FM OPRs I have reviewed (or EPRs for that matter) that all say best closeout ever, during toughest funding environment on record. Nothing inherently wrong with those statements except every year can't be the worst on record and they don't say much about how leadership made the difference.

Summary—to be or not to be—self preparation is key.

To recap, this article answers some of the most frequently asked questions to one very fortunate FM guy that got the rare opportunity to command a group and wing. Command is tough, hard work, involves long hours, and is often lonely; however, it is the absolute best job in the Air Force because you get to work with and support some of the best people in the world. Although selection is controlled through a board process, if you have a sincere desire to become a group or wing commander, preparation is critical. If you are a young lieutenant or captain, start honing your leadership skills now and seek out a mentor that can help with your development. If you are a major or lieutenant colonel, try to get squadron command, followed by MAJCOM or Air Staff. Finally, if you are a colonel, bloom where you are planted and show your boss that you are ready and have the potential to command. If you are interested in taking a walk on the wild side, my advice is to go for it. I guarantee you'll be glad you did!

About the Author



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